

/china/scotton
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Frank Scotton on Vietnam and Nixon's Aims

In 1964, FS thought there a way to win in VN, a "right" way. In 1965 and part of 1966, he thought we could (might? would?) win, not the right way, but by brute force, bringing in so much materiel...

(Although he already thought, in 1965, we had more to learn from the French experience than most Americans thought.

By the summer of 1967, he knew we weren't going to win the wrong way, either. He worked with me on the memo on Ky (I didn't remember this); and he took it to show to various others. He already believed in a political solution: get in a GVN that would negotiate themselves the best deal they could. (On my proposal to McNamara in summer of 1969 that we back Huong: Huong couldn't negotiate by himself, but others would have clustered to him that would have done so).

He got his medal from LBJ at the White House in August 1967 (when I got my picture with LBJ). On that occasion he told Harry McPherson--who he had met in VN--that the future was a unified Vietnam under Hanoi. In the early summer, after I left, ARVN began having trouble... (Dak To? ...)

In early 1969, he would have answered the question I put to MHH in June--"What percentage of the South Vietnamese would prefer an end to the war under either side, to a continuation of the war?"--at 60-80% (a little lower than MHH put it--80-90%--attributing the same estimate to his boss HAK). I had asked MHH: Then how can we justify continuing this war a day longer?

FS answer: Because Richard Nixon couldn't stand to be a loser.

[But would he have been seen as a loser? Wouldn't the public have accepted a disguised bug-out, HAK's 1968 "decent interval" approach, without reproach? And didn't RMN know that?

My guess is that RMN thought that even if the public would accept that or welcome it in the short run:

a) They might blame him for it, before 1972, if things went badly in VN (though did he really believe that? And was it likely? Unlike what LBJ faced, RMN didn't confront a RMN in the wings--or an RFK--to attack him for losing VN_;

b) RMN thought he and the US would suffer geopolitically, worldwide, for our failure: he took this consideration seriously in the light of his belief that

c)he could do better than that: he could get NVNese troops

out, by mutual (ground) withdrawal: by threats of escalation, including nuclear weapons, and by getting the Russians to pressure the NVNese.

FS: If they thought that (they did) they were naive. Nuclear threats didn't faze them [why not?] As for the Madman Theory: They felt they'd already faced American madmen. [Nice] And they weren't going to listen to the Russians.

As for mutual withdrawal: it wasn't for that that they were putting in a POL line down the Ho Chi Minh trail, in 1969-70.

But he agrees, as I thought at the time, that it made sense in early 1969 to propose mutual withdrawal. But once it was clear (by May) that they weren't going to buy it (or, as N--and HAK, once he got into power, working for Nixon--hoped, give up their hopes of unifying the country or sharing power in Saigon)--then they should have gone the political route.

There was a second RAMJET exercise [date? late 1971? They briefed it to Vann, saying it was a plan for a crash landing. He said: "The difference between a crash and crash landing is the number of survivors." In 1969 we could have told the GVN to go into negotiations with Hanoi using the number of US maneuver battalions as bargaining chips; they could have said, "We can get these out of VN faster than you can force them out; in return for..." [For what?]

FS had voted for LBJ; then, for Nixon, on his promise that he had a plan for ending the war. He thought N was really getting out. [What did he think Humphrey would do? What did he think N would do?] In mid-1970 he was on an operation six miles into Cambodia, sometime after the Cambodian incursion, with six VNese and an American sergeant. When they took a break he flopped down into the brush and said, "I can't fucking believe this." They asked him what he meant, and he said, "I voted for Richard Nixon because I thought he would get us out of Vietnam, and two years later look where we are." The sergeant said, "Well sir, I don't see you have anything to complain about. You're not in Vietnam, are you?"

But FS doesn't think N had a grand plan, or ever thought more than a year ahead on Vietnam. He just didn't want to be blamed for losing in Vietnam (My QM thesis, which FS doesn't seem to have read] He agrees that N never bought the decent interval approach.

How could he have thought he would hold the country together for four more years of war, as he did (I ask)? Because he was going to lower US casualties, as he VNZed. (And, threats of escalation).

On 1973 Accords: N never meant to see the political agreements carried out, and he was able to assure Thieu of this (i.e., that we would not hold Thieu to them, or condition aid on them, and that we

would provide air support when NVN renewed pressures); but FS doesn't think that Hanoi expected them to be carried out, either. [After all, Hanoi had the GVN sufficiently penetrated to know of our assurances.]

In 1969 N could have made "substantially" the same deal, not the identical one; e.g., N could not have made the secret assurances to Thieu [why not? because Hanoi would not have given the POWS back, in that case? Would not have accepted ceasefire? Even to get US ground troops out?]

In January 1973 Charles Whitehouse, deputy to Colby, asked FS how he thought it would come out; how long the GVN could last. FS said: through 1974; there would be a strong push in 1975; if it went well, the North would go for broke; if it didn't, Hanoi would treat that as a precursor for 1976. He didn't see them lasting beyond 1976 (even assuming some US air support).

Someone in Thieu's office asked FS what he thought N's promises of air support were worth. FS said he was sure they meant them sincerely, at that time. But every week and month after US troops had departed, it would get harder to carry them out. [In April, he agrees, it was still possible; but after that...]

With no US troops to support, the public wouldn't stand for more losses or POWS. [I think some losses would have been accepted, under the conditions. But POWS...?] And there was a real chance of losses: not only in the North, but in Cambodia, Laos, and even in northern SVN. So raids would have been token, limited to areas where losses were extremely unlikely; and these would have been ineffective.

How much difference would US air have made, after 1973? FS thinks, not much: though he acknowledges that it might have kept the North from pushing all the way in 1975. So it would have added a year, but it would not have averted defeat in 1976.

I mention Vann's proposal that many US troops could have been withdrawn in 1969, because with US air support, ARVN could do as well as the withdrawn US troops.

But, FS says, there were differences between 1969 and 1975:

1) The other side was badly depleted in 1969; it took them, predictably, three years to recover.

2) Vann had assumed that, by taking out a dramatic number of troops early, political support would be bought for leaving a significant number in for a long time [did he?], in particular special troops like the Special Forces. (Instead, Abrams was so mad at the Special Forces, for lying to him about the double agent, that he took them out earlier, by 1971-72). But by 1973, the public wanted all US troops out. Vann had assumed a strong remaining advisory structure, but in 1973 we took out advisors at

reg. (?) and battalion level. And Accords did not permit US based in VN, so we would have been limited to carriers and Thailand (which was cooling on use by US air).

3) True that ARCLIGHT worked well in 1972, but NVNese learned from this experience, and in 1973-75 they switched to mobile tactics, bypassing ARVN strongpoints (and not, as at Kontum, surrounding them with no escape route, forcing them to fight).

So FS doesn't think US air would have prolonged a "cheap stalemate" beyond 1976. [especially since N didn't get the mutual withdrawal he sought from 1969-72] It would not have compensated for rotten commandship at top levels, like Cao Van Vien and others who insisted on withdrawal in 1975. We had just hung on by our nails in 1972 [Why does FS think Hue was not attacked?]. With half the division equivalents withdrawn (down to 13 from 25 ? with US withdrawn) and half the air, how could ARVN stand next time?

FS thinks that although N and HAK did expect to return US air-say, in April--that they were not that unhappy when Congress cut off the funding:because they had someone else to blame for what happened, i.e., Congress. (Very interesting proposition. After all, they didn't have, and would not have had, this option in 1969: because Congress wasn't ready then to take on that responsibility! See the reaction of Warnke and McPherson to me; and Goodell's failure to get co-sponsors, and his expulsion from the Senate.)

And by August, N had other things to worry about!"

[From this point of view, Dean's revelation to prosecutors had less influence on the war than I might have thought--though it still might have shortened the war by a year!--but the effect of the PP in creating a climate where troops had to be withdrawn may have been more decisive than I realized.]

Truong Dinh Dzu campaign (in 1970? Senate?) showed SVNese wanted the war over, at any cost.

FS to HAK, Bunker, on Thieu reaction to US-NVN deal.

on PP; law; Turkey, Regional Security Officer;

"Legal attache" to FS on my private life. Shouldn't prosecute.

FS memo to Colby:

FS and SYun in Malibu in April 1970: I showed him strategic hamlet volume...

In DOD early 1970 I showed him my 1961 report; he realized, vs. QM...